

“HOLY & FAITHFUL”

Living Under Grace

Colossians 2:16-23

I want to start with a couple of quotations today, before we look more closely at what St Paul has to say in his letter to the Christians in Colossae, which we’re currently exploring on Sundays. They’re both from *Private Eye*, from recent reviews of biographies – the first from a review a couple of weeks ago of *Russian Roulette: The Life and Times of Graham Greene* and the second from a review this week of *Devils, Lusts and Strange Desires: The Life of Patricia Highsmith*. As with all the pieces in *Private Eye*, the writers are anonymous – all the literary reviews are under the by-line of “Bookworm” – but I suspect these are both by the same person. This is the last paragraph of the Graham Green review:

“All this makes Russian Roulette an absolutely fascinating document, not so much for what it tells us about Graham Greene, but for its take on the shifting tides of 21st century public morality. This, you will be interested to learn, is a world in which referring to a character in a 90-year-old novel as “the Jew” is a matter for shocked disapproval, whereas breaking your marriage vows and neglecting your children is, well, just something a famous writer does.”

(Private Eye No.1538 p36)

And the opening couple of sentences from the Patricia Highsmith review:

“As the newspaper pundits keep telling us, we live in a relativist age where old-style moral judgements hang uneasy in the air and it is safer to mark any kind of bad behaviour that falls short of outright criminality down as a lifestyle choice. The real sins these days are those committed against the prevailing liberal orthodoxies, not the sanctity of marriage or one’s familial duty.”

(Private Eye No.1540 p36)

Just let those quotations lurk in the back of your mind for a moment as we turn back to the second chapter of Paul’s *Letter to the Colossians*. The Apostle, you may recall, is writing to this group of Christians in the town of Colossae who have come together after finding faith in Jesus as a result of the preaching of Paul’s friend Epaphras. He is very anxious that they should grow and develop in their faith and not be side-tracked by a variety of false teachers who are changing, adding to and subtracting from the basic gospel about Jesus Christ. Paul wants them to keep Jesus Christ at the very centre of their lives and not start to follow these other ideas – these *“empty and deceptive philosophies”*, as he puts it earlier in this chapter.

Now, as we said a couple of weeks ago, we can’t be totally sure what the details of these other beliefs are, but we can tell from the way he responds – and from what we know from other sources about the things that were current at this time – that there were certain threads which ran through them. In this little section, which we’ve heard this morning, we can identify some particular trends which were causing Paul a bit of worry. There were, for example, some Greek Jews in Colossae – quite a community of them, according to contemporary historians – and some of them were adding to the Gospel a requirement for circumcision, dietary laws and regulations about keeping festivals. They had some belief in Jesus, but thought that wasn’t enough – people still had to keep to the original Jewish laws as well (v16).

Others were indulging in a kind of false humility and misplaced piety. They were very keen for others to think how good they were, how holy and serious they were about their faith, including worshipping other spirit beings and banging on all the time about their amazing experiences, as if that was the be-all and end-all of their faith (v18).

And then there were yet others who imposed an unnecessary asceticism on people, telling them that they shouldn't eat, touch or have anything to do with certain things (vv20,21). These were people, we know from elsewhere, who thought that they needed to have extended fasts and live lives of extreme deprivation if they were going to make the grade faith-wise.

Paul says that these ideas have "*an appearance of wisdom*", because they make the perpetrators seem very spiritual, but it's all a bit of a sham, compared with the truth that there is in Jesus Christ. He talks of "*false humility*" and a kind of neglect of the body in favour of the more spiritual side of things, an attitude alien to both Christianity and Judaism. And he says in v17 that "*These are a shadow of the things to come.*" It's all about image, about projecting a particular attitude that simply exposes the shallowness and emptiness of their faith, because the reality is found not in all of that, but quite simply in Jesus Christ. The result is that the Colossian Christians are in danger of missing out on the amazing, unmerited, freely available grace of Jesus, due to their insistence on yet more rules, regulations and human-centred orthodoxies.

Sadly, that possibility is still very much with us today, and we can see it in all kinds of different ways. There are still those who want to add all kinds of rules and tests of commitment to the simple acceptance of Jesus' forgiveness and grace. People within churches still have all kinds of expectations about how Christians should behave and the formalities, rituals and conventions that people need to observe if they are to be accepted – not by Jesus Christ, but by the other members of the church. Those who follow the rules – be it expressing worship in a particular way or holding certain views which are actually nothing to do with the Christian faith – like to think that they are somehow better than those who do not.

And, once again, much of it comes down to appearance and image. It's all to do with the outward view, the way we project ourselves, the shiny sheen we put on our faith to make ourselves appear more holy than others. And – once again, I'm afraid – social media can be used in this struggle to appear pious and squeaky clean still today. Paul talks here about "*false humility*" – the "humble bragging" or "virtue signalling" that social media seem made for. How easy it is to portray ourselves as really spiritual Christians! Just a click or two and we can be up there with St Augustine, Martin Luther and Billy Graham. And that then puts pressure on others to perform. It moves way from grace. Notice how much people like to say they're

“blessed” in their posts. Look at the number of praying hands emojis they feel they have to put up in answer to prayer requests: is it true that the more you put up the harder you’re praying?

And then we come back to the things that were said in those book reviews from which I quoted. There are, in every generation, those touchstones of orthodoxy that we need to demonstrate if we are to be the right-on Christians that we want other people to think we are. And they seem to take precedence over other basic aspects of our faith. This is about the priority we put in our lives and our witness on God’s grace as shown in Jesus. As we heard, behaviour that falls short of outright criminality is now put down as a lifestyle choice. Each to his own, in this individualistic culture, and let no-one judge you for it. Our life together as followers of Jesus can so easily be influenced more by what the world around us tells us is important, than by the basic teaching of Jesus, which we claim to follow – don’t wear a cross, wear a rainbow badge; don’t talk about morality, talk about self-expression. So your witness is dependent on your response to the orthodoxies determined by the world around rather than by the truth of the gospel.

So, the point that Paul is making is that we need to keep connected to Christ. He says here that those who rely on a presenting an image, who court the approval of the world, who want to appear super-pious, who go on and on about their spiritual experiences, who insist on the peripherals rather than on the heart of the Gospel, *“have lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow”*. Keep Jesus at the focus of all that you do and don’t go rushing off after other fleeting conventions and regulations. You will end up dislocated from the body, adrift on a sea of constantly shifting ideas and beliefs. As someone once said, *“Whoever marries himself to the spirit of the age in this generation will find himself a widow in the next.”* They change from generation to generation – just look at the way the church has condemned drinking tea and coffee, consuming alcohol, hatless women, swearing, Sunday entertainment and so many other things over the centuries. They are important issues, but to make them the touchstones of orthodoxy means missing out on the amazing grace of Jesus. He is where the reality is truly at.

Jesus died to demonstrate that grace. He gave his all so that you could be reconciled to God. He suffered so that you could be freed from these very pressures to conform to influences and ideologies which distract you from the glorious truth of the Gospel. Do not let anyone judge you according to things that are only a *“shadow of the things to come”*. Keep your eyes focussed on Jesus and enjoy his grace. Receive what he has to offer you and commit yourself to his ways.

And when you truly do that, these other things will all fall into place, because you will be **responding** to that astonishing grace, living your life in the light of it and following where it leads you, rather than trying

so hard to earn God's approval by doing what other people tell you will win approval – things that Paul tells us, are so often "*based on human commands and teachings*".

God loves you – never forget that – and he has shown that love in Jesus Christ. Accept his love. Revel in that love. Share that love. Express that love. And never allow anyone to downgrade that love in your life by what *they* say you should be doing, according to their ideas. Keep your eyes on Jesus and receive his love.

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Paul says that these ideas have *"an appearance of wisdom"*, because they make the perpetrators seem very spiritual, but it's all a bit of a sham, compared with the truth that there is in Jesus Christ. He talks of *"false humility"* and a kind of neglect of the body in favour of the more spiritual side of things but *"These are a shadow of the things to come."* It's all about image, about projecting a particular attitude that simply exposes the shallowness and emptiness of their faith, because the reality is found not in all of that, but quite simply in Jesus Christ.

Paul is making the point that we need to keep connected to Christ. Look at what he says in v19.

Jesus died to demonstrate true grace. He gave his all so that you could be reconciled to God. He suffered so that you could be freed from these very pressures to conform to influences and ideologies which distract you from the glorious truth of the Gospel. Do not let anyone judge you according to things that are only a *"shadow of the things to come"*. Keep your eyes focussed on Jesus and enjoy his grace. Receive what he has to offer you and commit yourself to his ways.

And when you truly do that, these other things will all fall into place, because you will be **responding** to that astonishing grace, living your life in the light of it and following where it leads you, rather than trying so hard to earn God's approval by doing what other people tell you will win approval – things that Paul tells us, are so often *"based on human commands and teachings"*.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) What kinds of things do we try to add to the Gospel? Do we have rules and regulations that can hinder our walk with Jesus? If yes, what are they? What can we do about them?
- 2) Why do the things we add to the Gospel *"lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence"*?
- 3) What should be our attitude as Christians to the issues that many outside the church see as crucial – sexual freedom, gender issues, racial justice, economic inequality and so on? (Go on – have a good argument!)
- 4) If we concentrate on the grace of Jesus, does that mean we do not need any rules or regulations? Why/why not?
- 5) What can we do to ensure that we keep our focus on Jesus at all times?